

# **Jalianwala Bagh:**

## **Memories and the Lack Thereof**



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## **Jallianwala Bagh: Memories and the Lack Thereof**

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Ninety-nine years have passed since the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In just ten minutes on the 13th of April 1919, 1650 rounds of ammunition were fired on the order of General Reginald Dyer at 20,000 unarmed people in an enclosed space. The group consisted of peaceful protestors against an order outlawing public gatherings and civilians celebrating Baisakhi. No warning was given before firing commenced; estimated fatalities ranged from 379 (the official figure) to over 1500 (as claimed by the Congress).

As reported in an inquiry conducted in 1920, Dyer stated that he ordered the firing to continue till the crowd 'dispersed', making the mad scramble for safety in the face of slaughter seem like a calm and organised activity. He also stated that were more troops at hand, 'the casualties would have been greater in proportion.' Though criticised by the House of Commons back home and relieved of duty, he was praised by the House of Lords and a fund was raised

for him amounting to £26,000. Dyer wanted to produce a 'moral and widespread effect' in the state to dispel feelings of rebellion reminiscent of 1857, and his brutality in this pursuit was lauded by many including Rudyard Kipling, who hailed him 'the saviour of India'.

It cannot be said that Jallianwala Bagh has been forgotten in India. It marked a turning point in the independence movement and has been canonised in popular culture, be it in movies or children's songs. Gaps, however, do exist in our memories, and certain surrounding events lie forgotten. Take for example the 'crawling orders' given by Dyer a week later, by which Indians crossing a particular street in Amritsar were forced to do so while laying on their stomachs. This street was where Marcella Sherwood, a Christian missionary, was attacked some days prior. The orders were issued to render the street sacred, with lashes meted out to violators.

In addition to gaps in larger narratives, our memories of the massacre lack the voice of lived experience. The recording

of people's histories has become increasingly popular in recent years with the launching of initiatives like the Indian Memory Project and the Partition Archive. The last survivor of the massacre reportedly died in 2009, and with him so did the lived horrors of that day.

The real lack of memory of Jallianwala Bagh, of course, exists in the collective amnesia of the British with regards to atrocities committed during colonialism. There was sympathy to be found amongst some Britishers at the time, the most unlikely of whom was Winston Churchill, then secretary of war. The same Churchill whose response to the deaths of millions in the famine of Bengal was, 'Why hasn't Gandhi died yet?', was moved enough to declare the massacre 'monstrous' and an event which stood 'in singular and sinister isolation'. In the following years, Churchill's sentiment was lost and the massacre forgotten. Almost a century later in 2013, hopes were raised when David Cameron expressed regret over what happened while visiting the site, though he stopped short of an official apology. Close, but no cigar.

Sentiments against the former Raj are roused every now and then, most famously through demands for monetary reparations from Britain or for the return of the Koh-i-noor diamond. Though an interesting thought experiment, these are also unrealistic. Far more doable, and immediately so, would be reparations in the form of recognition of the misdeeds of the Raj.

Acts of colonial brutality are an open secret of Britain's past that would make their present-day human-rights advocates blush, to say the least. Their skeletons are housed in an almost literal closet in the form of Hanslope Park, a high security building in England containing the archives of the former Colonial Office. It is from documents in this archive that knowledge of torture and murder of Kenyans in the 1950's Mau Mau uprising came to light, leading to one of the only known instances of British admission of their past in 2013 (which interestingly also led £20 million of compensation following legal action).

The list of wrongdoings to be acknowledged is long, and before we call for this to be done, we must be sure of why we do so. It is not to force guilt upon the British or to spur nationalist sentiments. Allowing for amnesia, however, is hardly a viable alternative. Just like individuals, societies are informed by their past. Even though we live in times where we move towards the future at an ever-increasing pace, we cannot outrun where we came from. Acknowledging the Jallianwala Bagh massacre would be a drop in a very murky ocean of British colonialism, but could also be the catalyst for far more. There is an added and very tangible benefit in all of this for Britain to sweeten the deal beyond just clearing their conscience; in the face of uncertainty on the international stage following Brexit, owning up to its past could help build bridges with an increasingly powerful India (not to mention numerous other former colonies) to settle its future.

So what are ways of going about such an endeavour? Precedents exist in history, most notably in the way Germany has dealt with the holocaust. The difficult-to-

pronounce term '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*', which translates to 'coping with the past', became a key concept in the country post-World War Two. Over time it led to the 27th of January being celebrated as Holocaust Memorial Day, and the creation of physical memorials to victims, both of Jewish and other minorities.

In the wake of Apartheid, the South Africa underwent a similar experience. The government set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where both victims and perpetrators of violence during the Apartheid were invited to uncover the truth and experience of the time. Amnesty was granted to the perpetrators, which played a major factor in the commission being successful and helping the country transform itself into a working democracy.

There is clearly no shortage of options available to the British. To start with, the archives of Hanslope Park can be opened unredacted, as opposed to the redacted declassification taking place now, a process which at the current rate will take numerous decades. Fact-finding



commissions can be set up with the guarantee of amnesty. It will be a long and arduous process, but one hopes that when the 100th anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh is celebrated in a year, history will start reading a little differently.

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